

# ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS: THE CORONAVIRUS AND COVID-19

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The novel coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19 is one of the most unpredictable global public health crises in recent times. Academic leaders across the United States have responded by moving their educational and associated activities online; as a sense of immediacy swept the nation. The decision to pivot to remote learning was made swiftly, particularly by those institutions operating a shared leadership model, benefitting from a greater degree of agility, innovation, and collaboration. The current article highlights three of the leadership best practices for navigating unpredictable adaptive challenges such as that posed by the coronavirus pandemic. Firstly, by utilizing a type of servant leadership, that emphasizes empowerment, involvement, and collaboration, academic leaders with emotional intelligence and emotional stability should place the interests of others above their own. Secondly, academic leaders should distribute leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the organization to improve the quality of the decisions made in crisis resolution and thirdly, leaders should communicate clearly and frequently to all stakeholders through a variety of communication channels. Looking forward, the rise of the flexible “allostatic leader” with the adaptive capacity to learn and evolve in crisis, to emerge better able to address future crises, is described.

The novel coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19 is currently impacting every aspect of daily life around the world. It is one of the most significant

and unpredictable global public health crises in recent times, and according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19 is contagious and deadly,

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disproportionally affecting the elderly and those with chronic underlying disease (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In the United States, the number of individuals infected with and dying from novel coronavirus infection is increasing rapidly, even as significant measures are taken to slow the nationwide spread of the pandemic. In academia, those in leadership positions at schools, colleges, and universities throughout the United States have responded to the crisis by closing campuses and residence halls, canceling commencements and moving their educational and associated activities online; as a sense of immediacy sweeps across the nation. The general public is staying home in often self-imposed quarantine, practicing social distancing to “flatten the curve” of nationwide transmission, since social distancing has previously been shown in modeling studies to reduce the transmission of the influenza virus in dense community settings, such as schools and colleges (Ahmed, Zviedrite, & Uzicanin, 2018). The coronavirus pandemic represents a serious and immediate adaptive challenge that can best be solved by all those impacted working together and thinking of others to slow the spread of the disease. Although leadership practitioners in academe (and elsewhere) have a crucial role in the response of their institution to crises, in reality, the role of campus leaders in establishing a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership prior to a crisis, will more significantly, influence the ability of the institution to withstand times of crisis (Kezar, Fries-Britt, Kurban, McGuire, & Wheaton, 2018).

Faced with the uncertainty and growing intensity of the novel coronavirus pandemic, academic leaders in schools, colleges, and universities throughout the United States made the strategic decision to transition to remote learning. The decision to pivot to remote teaching and learning has required new transformative learning for all stakeholders and serious adaptive work that is stressful, since many academic institutions lack the necessary digital infrastructure. Transitioning to online course delivery may require radical changes in attitude, values, and beliefs for some stakeholders (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001) and it may also require process enhancements, new strategies, and even new ways of doing business for many. The decision by leadership practitioners to transition to remote education was

made swiftly, prompted by social distancing practices, although some faculty were disgruntled because they were not consulted in the decision-making process. However, a rapid response from leadership was essential for effective crisis management, and it sent a clear message to all stakeholders that leadership understood that the coronavirus represented a significant problem, and that they were taking it seriously, and were taking steps to address it (Garcia, 2006). The rapidity of the transition to remote learning response comes counter to the perception that changes in academia occur only at glacial speed! The rapid response of some academic institutions to the present crisis was facilitated by the existence of authentic systems of shared leadership enabling local decision making (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Institutions operating a shared leadership model have benefitted from a greater degree of agility, innovation, and collaboration and now benefit from superior peer-support in a crisis than is possible in institutions clinging to an outdated and inflexible hierarchical leadership paradigm; the leader/follower binary model of leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). These traditional models of autocratic leadership are adequate when faced with technical problems, but faced with the complexities and uncertainties of the coronavirus pandemic that necessitates dealing with problems in real time; they are inadequate, putting these institutions at a strategic disadvantage. The transition from an authoritarian leader/follower leadership paradigm to a new shared leadership model on campuses cannot happen overnight. However, in response to a crisis, supportive vertical or hierarchical leaders may implement a type of distributed leadership in which different individuals, at different levels, cross organizational boundaries to exert creative influence in times of change (Holcombe & Kezar, 2017).

## **A New Toolbox for Academic Leaders**

Across the nation, academic leadership hastily organized workshops to familiarize faculty with modern remote digital teaching and learning tools, which have advanced considerably in sophistication and effectiveness since some faculty last checked their email. Academic leaders, who remain authentic, will be able to motivate faculty of the ambivalent majority, previously resistant to any form of technology-enhanced teaching

to attend these workshops. Nonetheless, many in academia are in uncharted territory; faculty, staff, and students, now working remotely are stressed, uncertain and even afraid in their new reality with their well-established teaching and learning routines disrupted. Empathy, compassion, and flexibility are in order, and appropriate leader behaviors matched to the context of crisis management in academia will be crucial (Doraiswamy, 2012).

To support the campus collective in pivoting to remote learning, academic leaders must use a new toolbox of intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspiration (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), while providing essential training, support and resources to faculty suddenly immersed in online teaching. Although some faculty, driven by their intrinsic willingness to innovate, has quickly developed serviceable online course offerings, academic leadership should manage faculty expectations. These hastily assembled online course offerings cannot all be perfect, and some may even be mediocre. However, those academic leaders capable of leveraging the skills and talents of the campus collective, by wielding a distributed situational leadership style (Harris, 2010) will allow faculty to perform at high levels. A distributed leadership style encourages collaboration and inclusivity, and according to long-established leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) works well in academia where followers are experienced, knowledgeable and intrinsically motivated. Faculty may be capable of building better quality online course offerings that establish a community of learners capable of working together to overcome the teaching and learning challenges posed by the current coronavirus crisis, when leadership is decentralized. These courses will leverage various digital learning technologies to promote interaction, the key to effective online learning and ironically the antithesis of social distancing.

### **Leaders Can See Opportunities in a Crisis**

There is an opportunity here for those academic leaders who are goal-oriented, risk takers, and strategic long-term thinkers to create a spiral of success and gain a competitive advantage by rejuvenating veteran

faculty in their redesigned educational environment. It is a time for academic leaders courageous enough to disrupt longstanding patterns of behavior, to challenge opinions and organizational norms, and disrupt the status quo. These leaders can successfully navigate the transition to remote learning with flexibility, understanding, and compassion. Looking forward, once the current crisis is over, and it will end, since the present disruption is only temporary, academic leaders will be presented with a dilemma as they rebuild. What to do with these makeshift online course offerings, rolled out in an emergency to get through the semester? Will they be refined and sustained in a new reshaped reality or discarded as a used band-aid? Academic leaders with the adaptive capacity (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001) to take advantage of strategic opportunities as they arise may now redefine organizational responsibilities by disruptive innovation and employ digital technologies to alter or eliminate inefficient legacy practices. Perhaps the digital resources produced in response to the crisis may be employed to assist disadvantaged students, those with physical and learning disabilities or in vocational course design for non-traditional students returning to education once the crisis subsides.

### **Best Practices**

Leading an academic institution in a crisis is stressful, given that the role and the influence of the leader are magnified in times of change. In the article, three of the leadership best practices for academic leaders navigating a crisis are considered. These best practices are; connecting with people as individuals and establishing mutual trust, distributing leadership throughout the organization and communicating clearly and often with all stakeholders. Although these best practices are described here in the context of academic institutions pivoting to remote instruction, faced with the current novel coronavirus pandemic, they may equally be applied by practitioners operating in other industries facing their own crises. Since connecting with people and establishing mutual trust, as well as transitioning to a shared leadership paradigm can take time, those in leadership positions should prioritize these responsibilities immediately upon accepting the position rather than waiting for a crisis to arrive.

## CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE

The attributes of an effective academic leader when facing adaptive challenges have been previously described (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020); they include but are not limited to accountability, trustworthiness, and integrity. However, in a crisis, perhaps the most important of all is emotional intelligence and emotional stability that will allow the academic leader to place the interests of others above their own in servant leadership (Doraiswamy, 2012). Servant leadership that emphasizes empowerment, involvement, and collaboration is a particularly effective form of leadership in faith-based schools, colleges, and universities (Wheeler, 2012) and it is a leadership style that becomes more critical in a crisis (Doraiswamy, 2012). Faced with the present novel coronavirus pandemic, academic leaders had to quickly overcome any lingering normalcy bias that they may have harbored, and quickly assess their current reality in which students, faculty, and staff are experiencing genuine difficulties in their everyday life. Following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, faculty, staff, and students at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana experienced considerable disruption to their daily routines in the aftermath of the storm. In their response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, leadership at Tulane was determined to focus on the welfare and safety of their faculty, staff, and students as their top priority, as they also transitioned to remote teaching and learning, and shut down campuses (Cowen, 2020).

Stress levels are high for all in a crisis and thus academic leaders able to pace the necessary adaptive work (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001) can regulate the stress they themselves perceive, and that everyone else is also feeling. Those academic leaders who are humble, considerate, and intuitive can best regulate the stress on all stakeholders, and in return, they will receive the full support of these stakeholders during the crisis and beyond. A leader's tough empathy (Goffee & Jones, 2000) is also important in a crisis and by offering both personal and professional support on a human level; academic leaders can maintain institutional morale through the crisis.

Leaders at all levels of an institution must act with deliberate calm (Garcia, 2006), courage, and humility in a crisis to strengthen relationships with individuals both within and outside of the institution. On campuses where there can be a culture of mutual distrust

and a divide between faculty and administration, now is the time to set distrust aside (Dever & Justice, 2020) and leverage the benefits of genuine shared governance. Academic leaders on senate committees with oversight of distance learning and information technology initiatives can profitably engage with campus administration to the benefit of the student population. Academic leaders can build relationships by inquiring, advocating, and connecting (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007) with individuals as people first, to gain their perspectives while leveraging the many benefits of diversity and establishing a mutual trust. Without mutual trust, there can be no transformative change. Some academic leaders may even use the crisis as a catalyst to re-establish dormant relationships, and reach out to establish new relationships with those who hold contrary views, those from the ambivalent majority, as well as those considered confidants, who can often provide a genuine reality check for the academic leader. Making connections with people at all levels of the institution during a crisis, allows the leader to be truly transformative and the collaboration to be meaningful (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

Building relationships and establishing mutual trust in a crisis is not easy, and requires that academic leaders be authentic and engage in active listening without judgment, accept advice and criticism, and communicate their views transparently by speaking from the heart, while promoting psychological safety (Kezar et al., 2018). In a crisis, leaders may be called upon to resolve interpersonal and task-related conflicts as they arise, though they should encourage healthy debate and conflict as appropriate, providing that it is functional (Robbins & Judge, 2018). Investing in relationships during a crisis will strengthen the bond between students, faculty, and staff and the institution; an investment that will be repaid in full, once the crisis passes, since relationships forged in a crisis by meaningful engagement can become long-term and consequential when the crisis subsides (Kezar et al., 2018).

## DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP

A complex adaptive challenge such as that posed by the coronavirus pandemic cannot be successfully navigated by the charismatic academic leader acting alone (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001); a top-down hierarchical approach is

unlikely to be successful in an academic context when facing a crisis that is so unpredictable and complex in nature. Therefore, the leader should be initially responsible for identifying the impending crisis as such, and setting institutional priorities before leveraging the collective knowledge of the campus community. Once these institutional priorities have been established, these leaders (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017) should delegate leadership responsibilities to a network of multi-disciplinary teams or task forces that will have a significant role in the implementation of the crisis management strategy. Ideally, an academic leader would select team members based not only on member skills, but on their character traits. The big five character traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness are generally preferred in team members (John & Srivastava, 1999). Additionally, the academic leader may consider diversity and cultural differences in team construction.

Distributing leadership responsibilities is more effective than other leadership approaches in a crisis (Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2019) and it will improve the quality of the decisions made since multiple perspectives can be obtained, particularly if each team is autonomous, self-managed, and empowered to make decisions (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). By distributing leadership responsibilities, the teams remain motivated and incentivized since they have more latitude in problem solving than would be the case on a campus operating a top-down leadership model. Provided with adequate resources, these teams should be allowed to operate in a climate of trust, established throughout the institution in a crisis, and engage in problem solving, innovation and change. Because of the nature of the current crisis, these teams operate virtually, at a distance from the main campus, employing a variety of technologies to connect physically dispersed team members. A remote working model allows teams to be constructed based on the skills and abilities of the team members rather than on geographical proximity (Robbins & Judge, 2018). The ability of teams to successfully accomplish their role is related to their distributed situational awareness (Sorensen & Stanton, 2013), and thus the leader must trust these teams to address the crisis with a moral purpose and implement solutions. Academic leaders should avoid micromanaging these teams that will utilize a shared leadership model to

pursue a common purpose; to maintain a quality student learning experience throughout the crisis without disruption. Having formed a network of teams in response to the crisis, these teams can work toward a response; they may refocus as appropriate and disband with crisis resolution. Upon crisis resolution, teams can disband with a sense of accomplishment having risen to the challenges presented by the crisis and their work may, in fact, yield tangible long-term benefits.

### COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

Leaders should communicate clearly and frequently to all stakeholders in a crisis (Edmondson, 2020), though they should be cognizant that it is not only the message communicated to stakeholders that is important but also the medium by which it is delivered. Communication media vary in their richness, and when the information is important as it is in the current crisis, more than one communication channel should be used (Robbins & Judge, 2018). In the current crisis, unable to communicate face-to-face because of social distancing practices, leaders should consider the live streaming of updates or messages of encouragement to stakeholders. The choice of communication channel selected by leadership should also consider stakeholder preferences and thus communication with employees and students may utilize different channels. Faculty and staff may prefer updates from leadership through email, while students, many of whom are millennials, may prefer to receive their updates through a variety of social medium platforms (or text message), relatively lean communication channels. Following Hurricane Katrina, Tulane leadership utilized a variety of messaging tools, apps, and social media to communicate with all stakeholders to build a sense of community, belonging and trust and reduce anxiety (Cowen, 2020). All communications from Tulane leadership in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina balanced reality with hope and empathy, while looking for silver linings in the crisis (Cowen, 2020). In response to the current coronavirus pandemic, Rice University is now crafting messages centrally, to ensure consistency, while customizing them for specific audiences (Field, 2020). Communication in a crisis is a delicate balancing act; too much and the message is tuned out, too little may prompt concern and anxiety (Field, 2020).



The integrity and credibility of the leader is important in a crisis; if the leader is not credible then the message communicated will not be perceived as credible. Those academic leaders able to communicate a compelling and thoughtful shared vision for the institution that is realistic and attainable once the crisis dissipates can inspire faculty, staff, and students. The process of communicating a compelling vision of the future has been described as *visioning*, and it is a dynamic and collaborative process (Ancona et al., 2007). The leader's articulated strategic vision should be aligned with organizational goals and consistent with the institutional mission to reassure all stakeholders that they are following the situation, and have a strategy in place for crisis resolution. Leaders must communicate how strategy establishes the mission and vision of the institution and execute on the strategy with resolve, adjusting appropriately as more information and the effect of their actions become known. There should be a transparency to the actions of the academic leader in a crisis so that the campus community is clear on the direction the institution is heading.

In times such as these, leaders must capture the complexities of the coronavirus pandemic, collect information as more becomes available and communicate these complexities, perhaps in simpler terms, to all stakeholders while outlining potential plausible solutions. By communicating appropriately to all stakeholders academic leaders earn the trust of faculty, staff, and students and obtain institutional buy-in and campus commitment in pursuit of strategic opportunities and alternative and sustainable solutions; an ability termed *sensemaking* (Ancona et al., 2007).

## Looking Forward

Having established the importance of connecting with all stakeholders as individuals and establishing mutual trust, distributing leadership responsibilities to situationally aware teams, and communicating with clarity and regularity, academic leaders can relax in the knowledge that they are not expected to be perfect. There is no such thing as a complete academic leader (Ancona et al., 2007), but those leaders with the flexibility and adaptive capacity to learn and evolve as a consequence of navigating a crisis, will be able to respond more effectively and with less effort to future

challenges and may just be the ideal “allostatic leader” for our academic institutions looking forward (Yarnell & Grunberg, 2017, p. 36). The ability of a leader to learn and evolve from facing significant crucibles is an essential component of effective leadership (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). By committing to these leadership best practices, academic leaders will emerge from the crisis to rebuild, with their credibility and brand untarnished and perhaps even enhanced.

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